



Judith Pettigrew, Maoists at the Hearth

Everyday Life in Nepal's Civil War

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Book Reviews

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Dan V. Hirsland

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- 1 When, on February 4 1996, an obscure faction of Nepal's left-movement, submitted a 40-point memorandum to the government with the threat of initiating an armed revolt unless its ambitious demands for a completely restructured polity were immediately addressed, few had anticipated the decade-long militarized conflict that was to engulf most of the country and which left over 16,000 people dead and 1,300 missing. The history of Nepal's Maoist uprising is yet to be written, in part because its effects are still unfolding. But it is an event which has drastically altered the country's social and political landscape and none more so than in the rural areas. Adopting the Maoist strategy of a 'Protracted War', it survived in the interstices of the village economy, drawing from it resources of personnel and food while exerting varied control over rural politics in its effort to combat and drive away the local state, in particular police and health posts. The Maoist movement, a surprisingly tight organization composed of various fronts and alliances, grew through the mass mobilization, conscripted and voluntary, of significant sections of rural youth whose participation reverberated through the entire social fabric as generations became adversaries and as villages split along political lines. Adopting an interventionist 'cultural revolution', the Maoists sought to reconfigure the basic social relationships at the heart of a caste-dominated discriminatory social order. However, in their trail, the Maoists left not so much permanently altered societal structures as much as changed consciousness and scarred relations. Nationally, the legacy of Maoism in Nepal might be visible only in the birth of a republic and (yet another) formidable party machine but its effects on how exclusion is understood and articulated in all layers of society are likely to be much more profound for the continued unfolding of the country's democratization processes.
- 2 Just how profound these changes have been can be gleaned from Judith Pettigrew's carefully crafted monograph on everyday life during the conflict. Pettigrew, who is a Senior Lecturer at the Department for Clinical Therapies at the University of Limerick, has conducted long-term anthropological research in Nepal since the early nineties with an interest in illness, mental health and cultural practices of healing among the Gurungs, one of Nepal's larger ethnic groups comprising around 500,000 people and residing mainly in Central Nepal. Pettigrew's fieldwork has centered around the village of Kwei Nasa (a pseudonym) in the midhills – about a day's walk from Nepal's second-largest city, Pokhara – and she has returned regularly since her doctoral research in 1991-1992 thus keeping her close social relations with villagers alive and allowing her to witness the changes occasioned by the spread of the Maoist movement. Within the large sea of publications on the 10-year conflict, this historicized ethnography makes her tale unique and is arguably the book's greatest strength: it gives us a *longue durée* look at changing social dynamics within one particular village over two decades, thus providing a strong frame for assessing long-term political and social change.
- 3 The book opens with a haunting description of a young boy digging in the garden for radishes with a small hoe. Suddenly, he turns the hoe into a 'gun' and imitates the spraying of bullets on the ground and walls of the garden with accompanying sounds of 'ra, ta, ta, ta, ta'. He then carefully returns to digging out radishes for the evening meal. Pettigrew forcefully uses this scene to highlight the routinization of violence and the intertwining of the conflict with everyday acts of village life. Through skillfully recounted ethnographic scenes of this sort, the author paints an intimate picture of how villagers experienced and expressed the changing life circumstances that followed from being drawn into the conflict. We follow a small handful of characters as they are caught up in the whirlwind of war and watch how alliances shift, new conflicts arise, and individuals try to cope with, incorporate and, to a limited extent, challenge the arrival of Maoist soldiers in the village. In particular, the narrative zooms in on the character of Dhan Kumari, introduced as Pettigrew's 'village sister', with whom she lived during her doctoral fieldwork and with whom she stays whenever returning to the village for her ongoing

research interest in the area. Pettigrew's intimate, and at times strained, relationship with Dhan Kumari provides the book with a great part of its impetus, as we follow their conversations on various matters of life and witness Dhan Kumari's slow but steady isolation within the village; an isolation, which stems from many unfoldings in her personal life and from the political ideas introduced by Maoist cadres that challenge an elder woman's authority.

4 The analysis unfolds over six chapters arranged in chronological order. The first, and ethnographically the most substantial chapter, deals with the village before the conflict. In this classical, if condensed, 'village study', Pettigrew describes the importance of the agricultural seasons and its accompanied ritualization, the contentious existence of clan hierarchies in a community characterized by an egalitarian ethos, the long histories of male army recruitment that have created elaborate gift-giving ceremonies (and a proclivity for army clothing as village fashion), and Kwei Nasa's integration into the local state and patronage politics. Most of the chapter, however, is occupied with drawing out the close link between Gurung households and cultural perceptions of personhood. Consistent with the large regional literature on vernacular Buddhist-Shamanic traditions, Pettigrew highlights the sacrality of spaces around the household and its connection to human life cycles, manifested in the presence of protective spirits and the use of (physical) space to ritually mark (cultural) prohibitions. Crucially, only those with whom one's family is intimate are invited to enter houses, thus underlining the metonymical extension of a house's interior with personal interiority, the hearth as the center of this spatial grounding of personhood and the fixed space for maternal authority. Conversely, the veranda is an ambiguous space since it marks the threshold of domestic space and Pettigrew uses this spatial analysis of domestic sacrality to draw out a similar distinction between the homely spaces of village-life, termed *yula*, and the outside world (*desh*) where cultural competency and local knowledge loose their relevance. So just as the household protects families against harmful strangers and is the space reserved for *norbe taa*, inner talk, so too does the village describe a protected space of Gurung identity. Pettigrew is careful to explain that these spatial boundaries are dynamic, yet they form the centerpiece of her argument, namely that the Maoists challenged the sacrality of households and that this trespassing created stress and social tensions.

5 The following four chapters unravel the arrival of Maoists in Kwei Nasa and the gradual intensification of their presence. It is only towards the end of the 1990s – after almost four years of insurrection – that their presence began to be felt in the area where Pettigrew worked, and when she returned in early 2000, the first signs of fear were expressed by Dhan Kumari and her friends. Since Dhan Kumari is among the wealthier families in Kwei Nasa, her fear was more pronounced than among less affluent Gurungs but, at that point, the Maoists were still perceived as an outside threat on the same level as forest spirits – an 'ever-expanding category', as Pettigrew explains, 'which included both the insurgents and a bewildering mixture of others who masqueraded as Maoists' (Pettigrew 2013: 55). However, it soon became clear to the more senior villagers with whom Pettigrew spent most of her time, that the perception of the Maoist threat as an exclusively external phenomenon was misleading, as villagers started to recognize local Gurung teenagers among Maoist traveling groups. The repercussions of this first localization of the conflict were multiple as villagers no longer knew who to trust and witnessed cultural codes for status-appropriate behavior across generations being breached. Pettigrew's interlocutors were beginning to experience that they had 'no place to hide' (Pettigrew 2013: 60).

6 This gradual breakdown of control over the social environment receives another thrust during Pettigrew's next visit towards the end of 2002 (chapter three). By then, the Maoists had set up a training camp not far from Kwei Nasa and both Maoist and army soldiers regularly passed through the village in search of food or insurgents in hiding, respectively. Fear was then much more tangible, even if not shown publicly, and Pettigrew recounts villagers' elaborate efforts to identify army soldiers from Maoist guerillas by their clothing and the great care taken to avoid being associated with either. Villagers had effectively lost physical control of their locality, their *yula*, but sought to regain a measure of control through the 'tracking' of Maoist whereabouts and subtle forms of communications based on shared language and

local reference points. Then, in chapter four – the most detailed ethnographic description of Maoists-villagers relationships – Pettigrew recounts the two-day long camping of Maoists in Dhan Kumari's courtyard while she and her interpreter were present. Through subtle analyses of the conversations and interactions between villagers and the insurgents, Pettigrew draws out the complex negotiations of authority between Dhan Kumari and her 'guests' as the former endeavors to contain and control the perceived danger to both herself and her household. Alternatively drawing on cultural norms of flirtation, maternal care, rural hospitality, householder authority and shifting between (mild) scolding and subservience depending on her interlocutor who she is facing, the analysis shows the diversity of Maoist guerillas and the overlapping codes of behavior that allowed Dhan Kumari to claim her space despite the physical invasion of her house.

- 7 Between 2002 and 2005 (chapter five), the conflict around Kwei Nasa intensified with Maoist and army soldiers struggling to assert control. By 2004, the village was under Maoist command and the army's military operations resulted in physical abuses and, on one occasion, the death of three civilians in a nearby village. Criminals masquerading as Maoists looted confused villagers and army soldiers infiltrated intimate spaces during search operations, trying to get villagers to poison the food cooked for Maoists (which they evaded doing by claiming 'we are just little people, we can't do that' (Pettigrew 2013: 125). Not only did villagers have to deal with the erratic and increasingly punitive Maoist command but the arrival of the security forces added a new layer of complex interrelationships and deeply complicated villagers' control of the situation. The fear of being recognized as a spy gained new proportions and villagers started identifying each other as *rhaba* or *a-rhaba* – i.e. 'conflict competent' or 'conflict-naïve'.
- 8 Then, by late 2006, as Pettigrew returned to Nepal after the People's Movement in April and the peace agreement in November (chapter six), the army soldiers and the Maoist threat were gone. In fact, as she arrived back in Kwei Nasa, Pettigrew noticed that the bamboo Maoist martyr's gate had been dismantled by villagers to be used as firewood. Likewise, Dhan Kumari had stopped bolting her door and instead Maoist supporters, including locals who had recently professed to being Maoists, were openly parading around and campaigning for Dalit rights. In turn, after the initial estrangement of Maoists, villagers were then actively engaging with those who used to frighten them and claiming that 'the Maoists are also people like us' (Pettigrew 2013: 149). Still, as Pettigrew thoughtfully explains, villagers reacted very differently both during and after the conflict. The dismantling of social fears took a lot longer to accomplish than the dismantling of the martyr's gate.
- 9 In the end, the Maoists were voted into government in the Constituent Assembly elections of April 2008 and won the constituency wherein Kwei Nasa is located despite being a traditional Nepali Congress stronghold. This support, as Pettigrew notes, expressed the villagers' recognition of Maoist military efficiency and their support of local candidates and local issues. Yet it also signaled a strong desire for peace and a Maoist vote also conveyed 'a plea to keep them from returning to war' (Pettigrew 2013: 155). The aftermath of the conflict, the book's last chapter, takes a look at the reconfiguration of social relationships and political alliances and shows how quickly Maoist politics became integrated into everyday structures of governance, as for example the building of a road which required the collaboration of opposed party representatives. In the larger unfolding of the political history of Kwei Nasa, Pettigrew thus shows the conflict period to be less a separate 'event' than an ongoing reconfiguration of relationships that saw a periodical deepening of structural violence and subsequently a differential reclaiming of village space, bringing new and unexpected opportunities.
- 10 This is an important book. It shows the everyday effects of protracted violent conflict and the social and emotional stress engendered by coping, and while this is by now a well-established genre in the anthropology of violence and conflict, the growth of Maoism both in Nepal and India has so far only yielded a limited number of close ethnographic observations of combatant-civilian relationships such as this one. Moreover, Pettigrew's account provides us with an extended historical frame for evaluating the impact of conflict on wider social change and asks what the long-term effects of the Maoist uprising are. Seen from the perspective of Kwei Nasa, Pettigrew seems to espouse two slightly conflicting accounts, however. On the

one hand, and following the dramatic unfolding of events between 2000 and 2005, we get a sense of a deep disturbance of social relationships among villagers and a penetrative sensation of fear, compounded by its cultural significance as a transgression of boundaries. This is what Pettigrew, drawing especially on Stephen Lubkemann's work on conflict in Mozambique, diagnoses, mistakenly in my view, as 'structural violence', i.e. the 'subjective sense of acute deprivation produced by changing socioeconomic and political conditions' (Pettigrew 2013: 2). Yet, on the other hand, Pettigrew recounts the swift and comparably easy reclaiming of village space and accompanying recession of psychological violence, which left little mark on 'people's psyches' (Pettigrew 2013: 163). Rather, the conflict period is recounted, Pettigrew explains, through the tropes of suffering; '[a]ll life brings suffering [...] just more or less, and the war (for most people) brought more' (Ibid). So while the insurgency challenged the social configurations of a Gurung village and created strong emotional distress due to the changed structures of authority and eruptions for violence, the sense we get from two decades of cumulative fieldwork in the same village points to the ephemeral durability of suffering and the relatively rapid (reconfigured) regeneration of village life.

11 From where does this analytical tension arise and how may it be resolved? Pettigrew's decision to write this book must have posed at least one dilemma and one challenge. The dilemma: how to write authoritatively about something that had not been researched but which relied mostly on random observations during visits and villager's own narratives? Pettigrew's strategy for solving this dilemma is interesting. She casts her book, wisely in my opinion, as a memoir, and it is through *her* travels to Katmandu, Pokhara, Kwei Nasa, and through *her* experiences during the conflict that the story unfolds. Anthropologists working in conflict areas are painfully aware that adding to the difficult methodological conditions of ethnographic fieldwork in deeply politicized environments follows the thorny ambivalence of representation. For how to write 'after the fact' when former hostilities have settled into new configurations and thereby risk to repoliticize publicly – if not personally – buried antagonisms? How do ethnographers tackle what seems to amount to an ethical double bind: portraying, on the one hand, the social world as precisely and honestly as academically possible while, on the other hand, protecting the integrity of research subjects who are, more often than not, long-time acquaintances and friends? By writing a memoir, rather than an ethnography of Kwei Nasa, Pettigrew succeeds in showing the complex historicity of key persons through their shifting positionalities however this stand also results in blurring somewhat the status of the perspective taken by the author. Is it through the eyes of the traveler, or those of the ethnographer, that generalized comments about the nature of Kwei Nasa villagers should be read? When Pettigrew, for instance, recounts an incident where Maoist slogans painted on the day-care center were whitewashed by villagers and then new slogans reappeared along with the threat that any attempt to erase them again would be met with punishment, how, then, should we read the following statement, that 'no one ever dared to paint out Maoist slogans again' (Pettigrew 2013: 87)? Is this the anthropologist who, through a careful analysis of the structure of fear, can conclude that such a collectivized fear would indeed be the outcome, or is it, rather, the traveler speaking from her position as the village 'daughter' of a frightened elderly woman? As we follow Pettigrew's own contemplations about her position in the village and in meetings with the Maoists – her thoughtful reflections about her misreading of the social landscape are some of the best moments in the book – the entire historicization of Kwei Nasa remains suspended between ethnographic accountability and a fascinating travelogue. We are not always quite sure which genre it is, and this, at times, makes it difficult to assess the implications of authoritative statements.

12 Solving the dilemma of accountability by adopting the memoir genre raises yet a difficult challenge: how to frame the narration of the conflict from the perspective of the traveler without turning it into a travelogue, such as Manjushree Thapa's *Forget Kathmandu*?¹ Pettigrew chooses to foreground the role of fear, a theme on which she has written authoritatively before,² and on how everyday life, and to some extent social relationships, are reshaped during the war. Here, she skillfully makes use of her comprehensive knowledge of key characters and traces their narratives of change. Yet, in order to effectively recount

this reshaping, she places the entire analysis of the everyday within the cultural cosmology of Gurung householders and, through this, underlines her observations of distress with a strong cultural analysis of personhood. This raises the question why some villagers, ostensibly sharing the same Gurung values, were not similarly gripped by fear and were even willing to cooperate with the Maoists. In fact, Pettigrew's own analysis of villager-Maoist relations when Dhan Kumari was involuntary hosting them in her courtyard shows much more nuanced interactions that involve an overlapping set of gender, kin and generational norms with people who were, for the most part, raised in similar rural villages. These variegated obligations, whose observance is subject to concrete negotiations, are not exclusive to the traditions of Kwei Nasa but partake of spatially overlapping repertoires of behavior within Hindu, Nepali and South Asian socialities. The dualism presented by the author between an inside village world and an outside disruptive force creates an analytical gulf between Kwei Nasa and the growing influence of the Maoist movement. Whereas, Pettigrew's narrative does show how Kwei Nasa was actually changed from *within* through the gradual collaboration of villagers with the movement while it was underground and, later, by the considerable support it received during the 2008 elections. What emerges from the analysis is not so much the contrast between a culturalized world (Gurung cosmologies of relationality) and a dangerous outside force – and here Pettigrew occasionally buys into media portrayals of the Maoist movement during the insurgency that equated it with the destructive wilderness of the 'jungle' – but rather of the profound impact of a political movement with a radical different epistemology. Here, Pettigrew's experience as a traveler, and her close personal relationship with an ailing woman who has been gradually marginalized socially since the author first met her in 1991, may have complicated her wider anthropological analysis of social change in Kwei Nasa.

13 It seems then, that Pettigrew is telling us the wrong story. While coping, fear and agency are important contributions to understand life during the conflict, the larger frame of Kwei Nasa's gradual transformation, an analytical consequence of a representational dilemma, seems to call for a different kind of analysis, which looks at what has actually changed on a more fundamental level, be it cultural institutions, social values, political ideas, or structures of governance. Pettigrew does include elements of the 'changing socioeconomic and political conditions' that she correctly identifies with structural violence and inequalities but not nearly enough to give us a sense of what is going on and why. Ultimately, we do not really understand why the Maoists have been successful in winning over local support, particularly if their regime was so terrifying. Much of this problem stems from the author's lack of description of the Maoist movement, their ideology and political goals (only on page 110 do we get the first nuanced depiction of the movement and its members but still within the genre of a traveler's description). Without an understanding of what kind of political phenomenon the Maoist movement was, it becomes difficult to understand both the opposition and collaboration they engendered. Clearly, as Pettigrew also acknowledges, it was not primarily through violence that the Maoists established themselves in the rural areas, though fear and repression did play a role. An exploration of how they managed to gain and retain a lasting influence in Nepal's Western Region calls for a more serious engagement with the movement, its goals, and its structural impact.

14 The book opens the window to new nuanced examinations of the thorny unfolding of Nepal's 'revolution from below' as masses of rural village youth were politically mobilized and threatened, for a while, to overturn the established discriminatory patrimonial caste-order. Critical reflections on the country's long democratization process needs these engaged and solidly grounded accounts. But more research is needed to connect the larger political and economic dynamics with the concrete unfolding of localized events in order to assess their importance and potentiality for more just and inclusive political outcomes. Hopefully, we will see more of such critical accounts of South Asian Maoist movements' contribution to wider democratisation processes in the future.

Notes

1 Thapa, Manjushree (2005) *Forget Kathmandu. An Elegy for Democracy*, New Delhi: Penguin, Viking Books.

2 Pettigrew, Judith; Adhikari, K. (2009) 'Fear and Everyday Life in Rural Nepal', *Dialectical Anthropology*, 33, pp. 403-422; Pettigrew, Judith (2004) 'Living between the Maoists and the Army in Rural Nepal', in Michael Hutt (ed.), *Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion*, London: Hurst & Co., pp. 261-283.

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